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Improvement of Education ..in Rural Schools..



Reprinted from Report of the Dominion Educational
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BY PROFESSOR JAMES W. ROBERTSON
Ottawa, Canada.

Improvement of Education in Rural Schools

BY PROFESSOR JAMES W. ROBERTSON.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,—I desire to thank you for the honour of an invitation to address the convention of the Dominion Educational Association. In expressing my thanks, I must beg your indulgence while I speak of something which may be attempted towards the improvement of rural schools in Canada. The eloquence and fervor of those who have addressed the convention to-night and at previous sessions have been such as to nourish national sentiment or the sentiment which finds its expression in patriotic displays in connection with national movements. National life of a worthy sort for us rests on the labours of teachers; and whatever helps to make them effective, strengthens the national life. Any national greatness, which we may have or attain to, must come from an intelligent, God-fearing and capable population. To ensure these qualities in our people, it will be admitted by every one, that in the rural schools we need the best education.

THE DOMINION EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION.

I take it that this organization, like all other organizations, comes from the life and activity of the individual members who compose it; and that as an organization, it is meant for real use, that is to bring something to pass, besides the passing of resolutions. At a convention of teachers, one may look for a frank and unhesitating intellectual hospitality. More even than other people with open minds, those engaged in educational work should have no prejudice against information, or suggestions, even if these should come from

unexpected quarters. I have observed in the discussions that teachers are fearless and even lavish in their criticisms of the educational systems in the various provinces from which they hail. They speak with a vehemence of adjectives which I would not venture to imitate. Such words of a descriptive sort as "vicious," "pernicious," "preposterous," are tossed about with a freedom from responsibility which I would not dare claim. However, out of the information, the suggestions and the criticisms should come some inspiration to be directed into definite practical action after these meetings are over.

An organization or convention which does not do anything except make or listen to speeches, pass or record resolutions, makes but little use of the intellectual ammunition of those who take part in its discussions. My own contribution to the proceedings will have value only in so far as it leads to practical action afterwards.

THE MANUAL TRAINING MOVEMENT.

My name has been connected with Manual Training in the public schools since I have the honour to administer the Macdonald Manual Training Fund for Canada.

It is rather unfortunate that this reform in the methods of education should have come to us under the name of "Manual Training." There are in this newer education three forms of expression which are used interchangeably. I am sorry for that ; it leads to much confusion. The three are : Manual Training, Industrial Education, Technical Education. I see them in the newspapers, read them everywhere, and hear people talking about them ; and the one means the other to most people. Now, they are not the same thing at all—not at all the same sort of thing. The spirit of the thing determines its nature. The spirit is quite different in those things I have named.

Manual Training is that part of general education which seeks its result in the boy himself or in the girl herself, seeks the result there and nowhere else, without regard to the particular occupation to be followed afterwards. The things made by a child in Manual Training may as well go into the stove or into the waste-paper basket ; but the things made by a boy in an industrial school, under a system of Industrial Education, are made for the sake of the

things and made for the sake of the ability to make the same or similar things that will sell. I do not say that is a poor part or an unnecessary part of education, but it is not Manual Training.

Industrial education imparts information and gives training for the particular purpose of fitting a boy or girl, or man or woman to be capable, expert and skilful in some industrial occupation.

Technical Education has some manual training in it, but the manual training in technical education has a price in it and on it for the worth of its products. It is looking to the effect of the training on the craft and on the product, and not on the person. Technical Education is to prepare a boy or girl, or man or woman, for following successfully a trade or profession. Manual Training in a technical school is pursued as an end in itself; the idea behind it is utilitarian only. There is a difference—a tremendous difference—and Manual Training is not so valuable after a boy is past fifteen. It then becomes technical education and craftsmanship, which have their value in dollars and cents, but which are not essential as part of an elementary school system. On the other hand, Manual Training is a means for developing the faculties and giving the boy that all-round training which he is entitled to in a country like ours.

Any attempt to impart a purely utilitarian character to the education of young children is bound to defeat its own object. A child is one and indivisible. After reading books on the subject one is almost persuaded that a child is not one—that a child is like the wooden puzzle we used to have as boys. You pulled out one peg, and that was one part; you continued, and laid all the parts in separate places. After a while you tried to put them together, and when it was finished it was a man. So we speak of the body, and we have gymnastics for the body; we speak of the mind, and we have intellectual training for the mind; we have the emotions, and we have music and all such nice things for the emotions; and then we have the will, and we make a boy do disagreeable things, and refrain from doing pleasant things, to train his will. The disagreeable has been counted a necessary element in mental and moral training of high discipline. That is my old wooden puzzle over again; you take the boy all apart and scatter him about, and then try to put him together again—and you find that you haven't the boy. The boy is not that sort of thing; the division is not real, and the making of the divisions for clearness of explanation, is at too great a cost.

EDUCATION IN RURAL DISTRICTS.

The improvement of the rural schools is one of the important public questions in Canada to-day. In our educational progress not much has been done for the boys and girls in rural schools compared with what has been given to and made possible for the children in towns and cities.

The after-life of the boy who leaves the country school, to follow some occupation in the locality, does not readily join itself to the school life which he then leaves behind. In nearly every case the school life has been an experience apart from, different from, and only in a very remote way leading up to, the mental or bodily labours and social duties which are to occupy him afterwards. It becomes necessary, since the school house absorbs so much of the time of the boys and girls, to adapt rural schools to rural life.

In educational Manual Training the advance has been one from books to benches as a means of mental culture. In rural schools the advance should be from books to benches, and from both to plots of ground and various objects, as a means of mental culture. This sort of thing is being carried on most successfully, particularly in the schools of Nova Scotia and those of the North West Territories. A piece of ground attached to a rural school should be utilized, each child having his own small plot, which he can use like his slate, putting things in it and on it, and rubbing them off again—not for the sake of the things, but for the sake of the child's growth in knowledge and mental ability. I hope that ere long we shall have many schools in Canada, where boys and girls will have an opportunity of getting this better sort of education. For instance, suppose a boy should plant ten grains of wheat in a row, ten grains of Indian corn in another row, ten sets of potatoes in another row, and ten clover plants in another row. Suppose, further, that he should pull up one of these plants every week, and find out for himself, under the guidance of a competent teacher, all that had happened in the meantime. Suppose, further, that as far as he was able he should make drawings of the plants and a written statement of the progress of growth as he was able to observe it from week to week, would not such a course for ten weeks, occupying only half a day per week, give an intelligent boy or girl not only a great amount of exceedingly useful information, but also habits of investi-

gation, observation, comparison and thoughtfulness, which are so desirable?

In this matter, as in Manual Training, the course of studies and exercises should be graduated to the abilities of the children. Such courses have been followed with great success for many years in European countries, and of late years they have become part of the school system in some places of our own country, under the name of Nature Studies. Perhaps what is needed most is the help of experienced teachers, who know the true educational plan to put below such work and study by the children, that it might not degenerate into only a means of giving them a mass of scrappy and disconnected information about a great number of things. Books do that well enough, or badly enough, now. The purpose below this newer method should be to train the faculties of the children in natural ways, and to make the objects, the exercises, and the information acquired, all strictly serviceable to that end.

The difficulties which have hindered progress in the past are said to have been: Want of money, the fact that the time table was already too full, and the fact that teachers are not properly qualified to take up fully these better methods.

Reforms of a permanent sort must necessarily be brought about little by little. The teacher and the school trustees, without substantial outside help at the beginning, can go only a little further than they are followed and supported by local opinion.

ABOUT SUBJECTS AND METHODS.

In considering the subjects which should be to the very front in the school course, one is warranted in saying that those which deal with nature should come first, and perhaps those which deal with human nature should follow. It seems to me that a great deal of nonsense has been talked about the cultural value of the subjects, which have been grouped under the name of Humanities, for children in the elementary schools. In the elementary schools, the children are very much children, and it is obvious that their faculties can be called out into activity, and trained better, on what they can see and handle and even make for themselves, than on subjects more or less (and usually a great deal more) theoretical.

The matter of all subjects should itself be suggestive and not artificial. It should certainly be full of purpose for the awakening and sustaining of the interest of the child and the training of his mind.

If one may mention a method which would seem to include the best, it would be that of tracing results back to their causes until that habit of mind is formed in the children. In Nature Studies, those who have experience say that the beginning should be made with what is solid and obviously practical, and that then the child should proceed to book lessons when his own observation is exhausted.

It will certainly be of great benefit to the children at any rural school if a school garden containing plots for every child above the age of eight or nine years could be provided. These gardens could be used, as they are at a few schools in England and as they are in many schools on the continent of Europe, for the training of children to habits of close observation, of thoughtfulness, of reflection and of carefulness.

It is certainly most desirable to cultivate in the child a love of labour, of even the sort of labour by which the child is to live, in order that he may be trained to ability therein. It is most desirable to cultivate a love of study, and to incline the children towards becoming lovers of ideas as well as lovers of labour.

To start and nourish ideas the teachers use methods, processes and devices. Children get ideas and ideals far better from things and from life than from symbols and words and books. We have six avenues for taking in impressions before we are educated ; after that, we have many more. We have six to start with : tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing, feeling and the sense of temperature,—that even a baby has. Those are six avenues for impressions. Now, if an impression reaches a boy's consciousness by all these channels at one time, don't you think he has the impression a good deal more clearly and distinctly and lastingly than if it came to him by only one of them ?

When a child does anything with its own hands, such as planting a seed, pulling up a plant, making examination of the changes which have taken place during its growth, making a drawing of it, mounting it and putting its name on it, he receives impressions by the sense of touch, he sees, he hears the noise of the movements he

makes, and he smells the soil and the part of the plant with which he is dealing. Do you not remember the smell of the woods and fields in Spring, and the lingering odour of the leaves in Autumn; and do they not bring back to you every voice and every sound, every bird and every twig that contributed to your impressions at the time?

Six avenues for impressions and only two avenues for expression—the tongue and the hands; a little in the countenance when you are angry or pleased, but otherwise the two avenues, the tongue to say and the hands to do things. Now, if we get clean-cut impressions along all those lines of sense, we ought to give them a chance of getting out as expressions by both lines, and not only by one line. We ought to do that for the sake of the ideas, and for the sake of the boys. Both may thus be of use and benefit to each other—the ideas and the children. Children would become lovers of ideas, and ideas would nourish their minds.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR ADVANCE.

No doubt teachers in Canada would be willing to qualify themselves for this better sort of work in schools, if an opportunity were provided. It seems desirable and practicable to give such teachers the opportunity which they need.

I would suggest four ways in which beginnings towards improvement in the right direction might be made. Might not a group of ten rural schools in some locality be chosen in which to give an object lesson or illustration of this better education to which I have been alluding? If a competent travelling instructor were engaged, who would spend half a day of every week at each of these ten schools, would he not soon be able to train teachers and children into these better methods of nature study and give practical illustration of training these faculties of the children which too often are altogether neglected? In some other locality could not a group of five schools be arranged under the care of one travelling instructor, who would be a specialist in nature study and nature knowledge as well as a good teacher in the subjects which have been common in the schools in the past? Such a travelling instructor could then visit each of these five schools two half days per week and give the teachers and children together lessons in the school garden, and

other object lessons, which would train their observation, quicken their intelligence and lead them to have desire and capacity for living happily amid rural surroundings.

Another way in which I would suggest progress would be to start evening continuation classes in the rural districts. These would provide the true solution for education in agriculture of youths in the country at the ages from fourteen to eighteen. One or two central schools of each of these groups might be chosen for evening continuation classes. At these, what the young lad working on the farm saw during the day with his uninstructed eye, could be explained to him in such a way as to awaken a new interest in his work and greatly increase his ability for enjoying it and carrying it on well.

Moreover, in some districts, the area for the rural school is so small that the need of funds and the isolation of school authorities from contact with others, cause them to let educational matters drift into still greater weakness and helplessness. If in some district an object lesson could be given of the consolidation of five or six rural schools and of the establishment of one well appointed and well sustained central school instead of five or six weak ones, that might lead to a general improvement in that direction. In some of the United States the consolidation of rural schools has already been carried out to a considerable extent, and in most cases with a very great gain in the quality of the education given in the locality and with no increase of cost to the ratepayers. It has not been difficult to arrange routes for the collecting of milk or cream to one central place; it would not be more difficult to arrange for the collection of children on various routes to one central school, and certainly the children of a neighbourhood are worth the best care and thought and spending of anything in the locality.

To make possible such work as I have hinted at and to let it be capable of anything like general adoption and extension, there is need for further preparation of the teachers. At several places in England this year, short courses have been provided for periods of only three weeks, with the expectation of doing a good deal towards qualifying teachers to carry on their work in a better way. In Canada it might be possible to arrange for courses of training for say twenty-five teachers at one place, each course to last for two months. During this course the teachers should carry on nature

study as they expected the children to do it at the school afterwards. A plant house is not so costly for construction and maintenance that this would be a very difficult accomodation to have for the winter and spring months.

RECOMMENDING AND SUPPOSING.

I recommend these four matters to your most sympathetic consideration : (1) the possibility of giving an illustration of the best method of carrying on educational work in rural schools in groups of five or ten schools ; (2) the carrying on of evening continuation classes for boys and girls of from fourteen or fifteen to eighteen years of age ; (3) the consolidation of rural schools in one or two districts; and (4) the establishment of training schools for teachers, at one or more places. These would all be in a measure experimental. I think they would serve for education a purpose somewhat similar to that which illustration stations, dairy stations and experimental farms have served for agriculture in Canada.

Now, *supposing* a committee of this Association should be appointed to take these matters into consideration, do you not think that such a committee could bring something to pass and have an amount of exceedingly valuable information to present to the convention of this Association to be held two years hence. *Supposing*, but you may say, what is the use of *supposing* when the want of funds and the want of time put the matter beyond the ability of the Association or its members? Mr. President, I have a great regard for the habit of *supposing*. Let me give you an illustration. One night with my feet on the fender, I sat musing and *supposing* what would happen if a thousand boys on Canadian farms could be led to take up the systematic study of the selection of seed grain, if they would each grow a special plot on their father's farm and discover for themselves what improvement would result by systematic and continued selection for several years. *Supposing* that were possible, what a great gain to the agriculture of the Dominion and to the intellectual life of the people on farms would result. *Supposing* ten thousand dollars should become available in the shape of prizes to encourage these boys to take up this work ; *supposing* that could be done, what then ? Well, the illustration of *supposing* I have given you, led to the sum of ten thousand dollars being put in the Bank of Montreal by Sir William C. Macdonald to do the very thing which I began *supposing* might be done, and which if done would be of great benefit to the people of Canada.

Now let me go back again to the matter of the committee of this Dominion Educational Association. *Supposing* a committee should be appointed to take up the matter of the improvement of rural schools ; and *supposing* the committee out of its collective wisdom decided that suggestions such as I have made, or others better than them, should be attempted in the way of object lessons, illustrations or experiments, in educational matters ; and *supposing* further that such a committee would undertake to supervise these object lessons, illustrations and experiments, if the money actually needed were provided ; do you not *suppose* that such a committee would do exceedingly valuable work in Canada ? Now, Mr. President, if I may drop the *supposing*, I think I am able to say that if this Association appoints such a committee I know where the funds for such work could likely be obtained to enable the committee to render such a great service to the Dominion of Canada as only trained, experienced, capable and unselfish educators could render to it, when assisted by sufficient money provided by one or more of the generous friends of education in our Dominion.

Such a committee could approach the Departments of Education in the various provinces with suggestions and recommendations and offers of co-operation, which would doubtless be welcomed. Their knowledge, zeal and enthusiasm could carry forward educational work in wise ways with due regard to the varied and manifold needs of the people of Canada. I am sure that out of such efforts might grow what would be of the greatest possible benefit to this country ; and I am confident that one of my friends will make good whatever I have intimated to the Association in my supposing, if such a committee is appointed and takes up the matter of the improvement of rural schools.

